THE DIVINE EQUATION

September 15, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Philippians 2:1-11
Mark 8:27-33

"He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?'"
-Mark 8:29 (NRSV)

He is the dominant figure in Western Civilization. He is arguably the single most important person who has ever lived. He is known today by more people in the world than any other individual. Most of the human race measures time from the date of his birth. Hundreds of millions of people use his name in their praying, and millions use his name in their cursing. If it were possible, someone noted, to "pull up out of history every scrap of metal bearing at least a trace of his name" not much would be left of the history of Western culture. [see Jaroslav Pelikan, Jesus Through the Centuries, p. 1] Art, music, education, philosophy, exploration, wars, all of it indelibly marked by the name in which we gather here on Sunday morning, the name in which we go about the peculiar and unique behavior called being a church, the man whose outstretched arms are over us or around us in the gorgeous cut and stained glass image you look at every Sunday morning.

Who was he? Who is he? "What nature of man is this?" his contemporaries asked in a mixture of awe and dread and simple curiosity. It would seem, after all, that we should know as much as possible about one who has so profoundly influenced our civilization. And yet there is about him a piercing, demanding integrity that repels as well as attracts. There is about this man something that frightens us a bit. If we saw him Frederick Buechner speculates, "we might avoid meeting his real eyes... the way that at certain moments we avoid meeting our own real eyes in mirrors because for better or worse they threaten to tell us more than we want to know." [The Faces of Jesus, p. 9]

Who was he? Who is he? Why must we always ask that question in both the past and present tenses? Harvard psychiatrist, Robert Coles, in interviewing for his book, The Spiritual Life of Children, asked three twelve-year-olds in Tennessee what they thought it would have been like to know Jesus. One answered:

"I'd have been living in a tent, maybe and I'd be a fisherman or a farmer. There he'd be and I'd be listening to him. He was popular then, before he got in trouble. There were crowds and he was a teacher people loved. They must have known he would save them: they must have known he was special - not the clothes he wore. It was his face, I guess, and what he said, and how He got to you." [p. 220]

I loved that. "How he got to you." My guess is he got to everyone of us in some way or another, and here we are still, sitting under his gaze and outstretched arms, perhaps still not quite sure who he is and why we are here, which puts us in very good company, by the way.

That's what the incident we read this morning is about - people around Jesus who aren't quite sure who he is or what they are doing there.

It is in the center of the story - geographically - Caesarea Philippi: behind Jesus of Nazareth and his small group of friends lies Galilee: the pleasant, rolling hills and small villages, the lake, the local synagogues, the months of teaching and healing and the camaraderie of traveling together. Ahead they can see the plain slowly rising toward Jerusalem.

It is going to be very different ahead. It is also the center of the story, theologically. Men and women have been following a teacher and healer. But now they must decide whether they will commit themselves to him, because following him, simply being close to him is about to become very costly.

So he asks them, "What are people saying about me? Who are they saying I am?" It's the academic question: the safe question. They tell him: "Some people think you are your cousin John, the Baptist. Some even think you are Elijah or one of the other prophets, dead for centuries, having come back again."

We should like to arrest the dialogue here. In fact, this is where we stop ordinarily. We Presbyterians treasure our tradition of faith moving toward understanding, of believing with our brains, of mind as well as heart engaged in discipleship, of knowing and understanding what we believe before we commit to it. We appreciate thoughtful religion... We are, all of us, amateur theologians. We believe God wants us to be. We are the ones who always check the authorities before we take a stand. And so we would prefer the dialogue to stop here or at least to broaden out a bit so we can organize an Adult Forum on the topic of "the relationship of Jesus of Nazareth to the eschatological and historical and and political hopes of the Semitic people emerging under the imperial political economy of Rome."

Jesus, however, pushes on without pause; from the academic to the personal. "But you... who do you say that I am?" It

became suddenly a high and holy and frightening moment, one that most of us would prefer to avoid. It's safer to be in that forum listening to a lecture, taking notes, sipping coffee. He was forcing them to stand and deliver. It was Peter who said simply, "You are the Messiah."

It was almost too easy. Actually it was a preposterous thing to say. The nation of Israel had been waiting for centuries for the Messiah, the one who would come in the name of the Lord, overthrow the enemy and reconstitute the old monarchy. He - this itinerant rabbi, this unemployed carpenter, this illegitimate son of Mary... the Messiah?... Preposterous!

Jesus doesn't say those things. What he does explain is what is going to happen next. The going will be tough. Some people are scared the Messiah might come and take away their privileges. The people who expect a King, on the other hand, are in for a rude disappointment. There is persecution and suffering and death ahead. And Peter, the one who just called him Messiah, finds that completely unpalatable and starts an argument - takes him aside to rebuke him. "Look, Jesus," he must have said, "I've just paid you a pretty big compliment, as a matter of fact, about as much a compliment as there is. And you're telling me that the future holds nothing but sacrifice and suffering for you and me?"

Please note that the ones who profess belief in Jesus are the very ones who do not understand the meaning of their beliefs. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes that "in the United States there is a casual indifferent readiness, even in our increasingly secularized society, to grant the main claims of the gospel - not to grant them importance. "The gospel," he says, "is thus a truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced." [Finally Comes the Poet, p. 1]

If that describes us, and I think it does, this encounter and conversation is a disturbing development. It exposes a way of thinking about religion in general that is very dear to us. Our assumption is that our relationship to this strange and compelling man is primarily intellectual. That is to say, we want to know who he was. And so we will approach that question with our full array of intellectual capabilities. We will read and talk about him as a man in history... We will analyze him with psychological categories and we will consider his political behavior... We will attempt to understand his theological context. Our assumption is that Christian faith is a matter of believing certain ideas about Jesus. When those ideas are condensed into a formal statement, the Apostles' Creed, for instance, and we stand up and say it, our assumption is that the saying it, affirming the proposition, is what defines us as a Christian. And it is important. It's easy to poke fun at our intellectualism but the Christian church has always understood the importance of thinking and speaking clearly about what it believes. Today, there is no more critical challenge than expressing our religion in terms which can hold their own in the marketplace of ideas. But understanding ideas about Jesus is not

the issue finally. No one, John V. Taylor, a British theologian noted, was ever converted by ideas about Jesus. Conversion happens out of our encounter with a man.

Please remember that Jesus never administered a theological examination as the entrance requirement to discipleship. When he pressed them to say who they thought he was, it was not a matter of orthodoxy. Rather it was a matter of the willingness to follow him.

And this little exchange exposes a way of evangelizing that is dear to us. Evangelism - spreading the word - normally means convincing people that our religious beliefs are truer than their religious beliefs. Evangelism means correcting other people's theology. But what if it is not finally a matter of getting people to agree to ideas about God. What if, as he proceeded to tell his friend Peter, evangelism is a matter of faithfully following by living the life he taught in the world, even when the going gets tough.

There is a stunning section in Hans Kung's book, Christianity and the World Religions in which the great theologian wonders how the history of Western civilization would look today if the early Christian missionaries had taught and lived the ethic of Jesus, the love and justice and compassion he himself taught, instead of trying to get everybody to disown their religion, which often meant their culture, and sometimes even their families as well, in order to affirm the orthodoxies of the fourth century Greek-thinking theologians. Kung reminds us that Jesus "never questioned anybody about the true faith, (nor) asked anyone to profess his or her orthodoxy. He expects no theoretical reflection, but an urgent practical decision." [p. 116]

After twenty centuries the Christian church continues to argue with itself about what it means to be evangelical. Evangelical is the new "hot" word in ecclesiastical circles and it ordinarily means the hard-sell, strenuous proclamation of ideas about Jesus in order to convince people to affirm them and sign up. But what if the good news - the Gospel - is not a series of truths to be endorsed. What if the good news is that the God who made us loves us and has created us to live in justice and kindness with one another. What if that's God's agenda instead of everybody singing out of the same hymnal? If that is the issue, then evangelism is very simply a matter of loving and serving other people and doing it not as a way to get into heaven but because in Jesus Christ we know that is what God wants and expects. This news about God's love and the life of love God wills.... this is truth. It is the truth about human life. Christ-like evangelism then does not mean becoming proficient at marketing Jesus: it does not mean how many souls can be registered in the great score card in the sky, how many heathens turned into believers, but how much love and justice and kindness and mercy is being lived out in the world in the name of Jesus.

What Jesus was asking them when he said, "Who do you say that I am?" - was not about their theology. He did not want a recitation of ideas about his identity... He wanted to know if they were ready to follow. He was asking for commitment not theological correctness.

Can you follow Jesus without understanding him? Of course. That's what Peter did, what all the disciples did, what faithful men and women down across twenty centuries have done - stumbled along behind him without knowing who he was or where he was going, convinced that he was worth betting one's life on, certain that his life, his love, was - among all of our life's uncertainties - permanent, unchanging and forever.

The little twelve-year-old boy pondered the way Jesus "gets to you." And maybe we can't put it any more adequately than that. He gets to me. I say the creeds. I affirm them as my own, but they are finally human attempts, very human attempts which employ the metaphors and images and vocabulary of one point in time to describe a reality that will not ultimately be pinned down. They are ways to express how this compelling man "gets to us":

- Ways to say that in this man and his life I have occasionally seen what my life is about.

- Ways to say that in his life I have become aware that God's love and blessing rests on all life and that in his humanness - humanity is blessed.

- Ways to help me say that in the life of this man I have seen what really matters in my life and the life of the world: things like kindness and compassion and gentleness and forgiveness.

In what I know about this life I have learned the redemptive power of forgiveness, and the miracle that there is no failure, no betrayal, that is immune to the recreative energy of love.

In him I learn that the purpose of my life and yours is the giving it away, the spending it, for the ones we love, our spouses and lovers and parents and children, our neighbors and strangers who need us - and that in giving our life away - we receive it back, blessed, recreated, in a new shape and form and dimension called eternal.

In him, on occasion, I have seen and believed that the death that comes to all and will one day come to each, is not the end but the beginning: that his dying was, in fact, for us.

In him, on occasion, I know there is hope: hope for the world: hope for people who live in the middle of grief and poverty: people who are sick and oppressed... all people.

In him I believe I can see the meaning of the word God.

Do I know all of that all the time? Does anyone of us? Of course not. But I know enough of it that it "gets to me": enough of it that I don't want to miss it because, if I miss this I might miss my own life. I know enough of it that I want to stumble behind and follow as best I can.

And my guess is that the same is true for you.

Wherever you are theologically - however many theological statements you can affirm, whatever your church connections, hear the most important question anyone will ever ask you: the question that can save your life...

"You, - who do you say that I am?"

Amen.